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What's happened to weird?

Nessie's turned into a real recluse. The men from Mars no longer pay us flying visits. And the spooks have been spooked. Why have all the sightings dried up? Sean Thomas investigates the mysterious death of the paranormal

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Ghosts, Nessie, Bigfoot, "little silver men with menacing probes": there was a time we used to hear a lot about these various manifestations of the strange, spooky and suspect. But not any more. In the past few years there has been a spectacular market crash in many kinds of paranormal activity; somehow our world just isn't as weird as it was.

Take the Loch Ness Monster. Since the first modern sighting in 1933, Nessie-watchers have been able to rely on about 15-20 reported sightings a year, with occasional paranormal peaks of up to 40. This January the official Loch Ness Monster fan club admitted that in the preceding 18 months they had heard of a meagre three spottings. "There has been an unusually low number of sightings, all of which were made by local people," admits Gary Campbell, club president. "It appears that no tourists at all have seen anything unusual."

Then there's the slump in hauntings. Tony Cornell is a vice-president of the Society for Psychical Research, the UK's most prestigious ghost-busting association. Cornell has been investigating ghosts for 50 years but hasn't been using his £8,000 of poltergeist-detecting equipment of late. "The society used to get maybe 60 to 80 reports of ghosts in a year," he

says. "Now we get none. None at all. A remarkable decline. It is still very strange."

But the starkest evidence for this general dwindling of weirdness probably comes with UFOs. Earlier this year, the UK's favourite flying saucer fanzine, UFO Magazine, folded due to declining sales. At the same time, Bufora, the top UK forum for skywatchers, ruefully admitted that UFO sightings have been in "steady decline" since the late 1990s. Most striking of all, the British Flying Saucer Bureau has suspended its activities, because the number of sightings has crashed from a peak of around 30 a week to almost zero. Denis Plunkett, the retired civil servant from Bristol who founded the bureau in 1953, says: "I am just as enthusiastic about flying saucers as I always was, but the problem is that we are in the middle of a long, long trough. There just aren't enough new sightings. It is not like being a philatelist. There is always something new to say about stamps."

This isn't just a British phenomenon. In Indiana in the US an amateur association of scientific ufologists known as Madar (multiple autonomy detection and automatic recording) has seen a steady and accelerating fall-off in UFO activity since the peaks of the mid-70s. Likewise, New Jersey's skywatchers have openly wondered whether to call it a day. Even the cold skies of northern Norway are bereft: "It's unexplainable," says Leif-Norman Solhaug, leader of Scandinavian skywatching society UFO Nord-Norge. "Maybe people are just fed up with the UFO hysteria."

So where has all the weirdness gone? One explanation that has been mooted, ironically, is the advance in detection-technology. Veteran Nessie-spotters, for instance, claim that hi-tech tourists with their videocams and fancy digital imaging, not to mention their whacking great SUVs parked hard by the loch, have made Nessie shy. The trouble with this theory is that it was the construction of a noisy new road beside Loch Ness in 1933 that led to the very first upsurge in Nessie sightings.

As for ghosts or the lack thereof, one theory is that the rampant spread of mobile phones is spooking the spooks. Cornell points out that the fall-off in hauntings has really gathered pace over the past five to 10 years, when cellphones have become ubiquitous. "Humans now occupy all of the electromagnetic spectrum. So maybe the ghosts, or whatever causes them, are suffering from interference." But he adds: "I personally believe the decline in hauntings may simply be because people haven't got time to see ghosts any more.

These days people are always rushing around, playing computer games, surfing the net, and such activities aren't great for experiencing apparitions."

As for the dearth of UFOs, several theories have been put forward. Some blame global warming, others argue it is all a government and media conspiracy and that there are just as many as ever. More credibly, sociologists have asserted that sightings are linked to the media in a cyclical way. When TV and Hollywood are interested in UFOs, people will simply look at the sky a bit more: hence the increase in sightings at the time of the X Files, the Twilight Zone, and Close Encounters. Fewer extraterrestrial films and shows might explain our current lack of interest.

All the same, such a slump would presumably be short-term - yet ufology hasn't seen a crisis like this for 50 years. And we shouldn't forget that the paranormal "decline" is almost across the board. Could there consequently be a more global explanation?

That is certainly the view of the Fortean Times, the UK's leading magazine of the weird and unexplained. "It is probably the case that there has been a fall-off in reported paranormal activity," says a spokesman. "We think this may be because the ordinary world is so much more threatening, and interesting, than it was a few years ago. These days journalists have wars and atrocities to cover, so they aren't going to be chasing some old poltergeist down the road. This doesn't mean, of course, that there is less paranormality itself, just less coverage of it."

So it's all the media's doing? Not necessarily. Some believe 9/11 and the war on terrorism have seized the dark place in our minds once reserved for ghosts and bogeymen. Walter Furneaux, a clinical psychologist from Brunel University who specialises in the paranormal and parapsychology, says: "To the public the idea of the al-Qaida terrorist, is almost like an alien. We don't quite understand their culture, we don't quite know what they look like, they live far away, and they are a perceived threat, in a way perhaps we thought aliens could have been."

Some, however, see a bright side to all this, arguing that the apparent decline in the paranormal is linked to a decline in credulity; ie we are becoming less gullible. Others aren't so positive. Tessa Kendall is a member of Skeptics, a London association that analyses the paranormal. "Yes, there may have been a drop off in ghosts and monsters," she says,

"but there's been a huge upsurge in conspiracy theories; people are more paranoid and wary than ever. So this is, perhaps, how people are now expressing their innermost fears."

The upshot? The next time you see a headless man in the hall, or a cow being taken to Mars, be thankful. It means things may, at last, be getting back to normal.

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